DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 055 527 FL 002 679

AUTHOR Guenette, Paul G.
TITLE A Challenging Direction for Foreign Languages.
PUB DATE 5 Oct 71
NOTE 8p.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS *Acculturation; Basic Skills; Cross Cultural Studies; Cultural Context; Curriculum Design; Curriculum Planning; *Educational Objectives; Educational Philosophy; Evaluation; Individualized Instruction; Instructional Program Divisions; Language Instruction; *Language Programs; *Learning Theories; *Modern Languages; Student Interests

ABSTRACT

This paper suggests a new direction and scope for instruction in existing language programs. The author proposes that language courses become "acculturation" courses which would have as their central educational objective the acculturation of the student into the target culture through language, civilization, and culture study. Learning style is to be marked by self-pacing in skills and interest areas of immediate concern to the learner to assure a continuance of progress in solving problems pertinent to each individual learner. Student evaluation, psychological learning factors, educational objectives, language skills, program requirements, and individualized learning are discussed. (RL)

ED055527

A CHALLENGING DIRECTION FOR FOREIGN LANGUAGES

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL OFFICE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY.

October 5, 1971

PAUL G. GUENETTE
DIRECTOR OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES,
BROOKLINE PUBLIC SCHOOLS
BROOKLINE, MASSACHUSETTS

In an ideal situation, the term "foreign language course" should be considered a misnomer. Perhaps courses termed "foreign language" should still be offered as specialized courses throughout the sequence in the future, but a better term, by far, would be a much more comprehensive "foreign acculturation course" with language being but one of the components towards said acculturation.

Thinking of "acculturation" rather than of "language", the principal long-range goal of such a course would be for all students to benefit within the limits of their abilities and interests from acculturation with another people through that people's language, civilization, and culture in a learning style and situations best suited to the student. The learning style would be marked by self-pacing in skills and interest areas of immediate concern to the learner to assure a continuance of progress in solving problems pertinent to each individual learner and possibly to no one else in a given group. At its full implementation heterogeneous grouping and ungradedness could result. Rather than basing advancement or promotion on a time factor, i.e., years of study, it would be on a performance factor, i.e., how much has the student mastered without regard to the length of stay in a "year" of study.

FL002 479

When it is at its best, one speaks, in a sense, of an experience that is as much social, as it is academic, and that is acquired from "within". The perfect setting would be "on site" in the foreign country with the learner participating fully in the life and institutions of the host country.

We have described the ideal setting which, perhaps, could be attained by some few even at the secondary level. For the vast majority of students, however, only less "real" approaches could be considered if one is to remain practical. Realism dictates an organizational approach to meet more economically the needs of most students. The setting, at times, could approximate the real thing with vicarious experience being the next best means towards acculturation. Acculturation, then, with other peoples should be the main long-range goal of our offerings. Meeting individual needs through a learning style assuring self-pacing and ungradedness would be the intermediate goals to quicken the process of acculturation. This learning style can be brought about!

Even though it is true that the study of a foreign language at an early age makes for greater oral mastery because of the younger child's greater muscular plasticity and ability to mime untiringly, it should not be presumed that only a lengthly sequence in a foreign language can make for an acceptable performance level. Factors such as motivation, social attitude, immediacy, and relevancy can lead one to attain acceptable results in a time span shorter than what would be needed if these factors were not present and the sequence longer.

A CHALLENGING DIRECTION FOR FOREIGN LANGUAGES

Continued: page three

If students, as proposed under long-range goals, are to benefit from acculturation with another people through that people's language, a strong base for acceptable performance in the language must be developed as early as possible in the sequence so that the target language may become a means as well as an end in the process of acculturation. Notwithstanding the composition and demands of the college boards, audio-lingual skills should be emphasized simply because one is dealing with a "modern" language, and because the transient nature of sound makes the pursuit of these skills more difficult to achieve and maintain. Writing, while generally demanding still greater precision, does remain, and is more easily recapturable. Sound communication, by its nature, is faster paced, less predictable and less manageable particularly in a society alien to it.

Since no one, even after a lifetime of use, ever grasps the totality of his own native tongue, one must settle maximally for acceptable control of a foreign language particularly at the secondary level. Complete mastery is impossible and if one were to insist upon it, movement forward in and with the language would be impossible. Conditions permitting acceptable control should come for most learners after three "years" or levels of study.

Upon attainment of this plateau of general proficiency, a plateau which could be reached by most students, branching into specific study areas for further perfectionning of selected skills could happen with the student determining at that time which skill/skills he wishes to pursue more intensely. Surveys indicate that listening and speaking skills are favored by large over reading and writing, but the choice, in any case, should ultimately be the student's. Besides conducting classes in the foreign language, content courses

Continued: page four

in foreign languages should be available with credit to be given in either the foreign language discipline area or in the content area, such as social studies, art, music, or home economics. It would not suffice to have "watered down" offerings given in a foreign language; content need be present and measurable so that honest credit could be given in either discipline.

All students should initially have a solid grounding in foreign language structure so that the language may become a tool in the process of acculturation, but because of certain factors, some relatively few students would fare better with a program de-emphasizing some of the skills of the traditional language offering. For these few, for whom the foreign language could not become a working vehicle, a shorter sequence would be in order in the traditional foreign language course, but it could be extended if it is found that performance is possible in one of the skills areas.

E.g. Some may well never learn to write because of lack of ability or interest, but they may be blessed with a finely attuned ear and facility to reproduce the spoken language. Opportunities for these people to go on successfully should be provided instead of considering them as failures since they have not succeeded in all the skills of a total program.

Of utmost importance are the processes employed to learn or teach. Whether we speak of skills attainment or of content, it is critical that individualized learning become a fact. Yes, even in foreign language! One is to beware of panaceas, but if there is to be a breakthrough in education, it certainly is in

Continued: page five

true individualization. At first blush, this style of learning and foreign language acquisition seem incompatible, for the learner starts at the "tabula rasa" point and is, perhaps, more handicapped in his efforts to acquire a second language than what an infant is in learning the mother tongue. The environment, for example, quickly becomes familiar, relaxed and constant for the infant; it is alien, pressing, and transitory for the foreign language learner.

Yes, individualized learning is critical particularly in foreign language, and it can become a fact if certain conditions are met. The first is to condition teachers to its potential. Some language teachers think individualization neither possible nor desirable; some equate it with the open classroom which to them is synonymous with chaos; most are beguiled by the idea, but are quite fretful of trying it in their field.

Long-range teacher preparation for acceptance is best met through in-service meetings, and the introduction in the on-going program of techniques and approaches that serve well an individualized program. Short-range preparation can be had only through intensive summer workshops wherein the teacher learns in detail the techniques and needs of a truly individualized program. Most importantly, the teachers must be involved in the organization or creation of copious software to sustain the program, once it has been philosophically accepted by them.

Continued: page six

In a fully established individualized program, the concepts of the various units of the student's foreign language curriculum would be taught most often by the teacher acting as a source, with the practice and re-enforcement of the concepts to be perfected by the student working in diverse skills improvement centers.

Such might be, for example, a listening skills center around listening devices. A second center might be around electronic language card readers which can be extremely effective in developing many language skills. A third area might well be a student-interaction center where communication skills, reading, language games, and peer teaching might take place. A fourth center would consist of audio-comparator units, which as self-contained pieces of equipment, can fulfill most functions of the audio-active language laboratory and be complemented by a machine-testing program for speech. A fifth center organized principally for the development of writing skills would involve students chiefly with programmed materials consisting of practice blocks to master the writing concepts, self-testing to ascertain one's proficiency, and supplementary enrichment or prescriptive units to further or correct one's understanding of the structures under study. The last, and by far, the most important area would be the student-teacher interaction center with the teacher giving attention to specific needs of individuals in the class be it in the form of small group instruction for a nucleus of students with a common problem, conferencing with and testing all students on a regular basis, acting as an immediately available resource, counseling and directing the students in their sundry activities.

A CHALLENGING DIRECTION FOR FOREIGN LANGUAGES

Continued: page seven

Besides conditioning teachers to the philosophical acceptance of a new approach and preparing them for performance in a new role chiefly as managers of learning in a very different setting, administration must guarantee other working conditions beyond training workshops and abundant software.

In a teacher-centered setting, small class size is of utmost importance to guarantee sufficient contact with the students. In an individualized program, it is not. Having a qualified para-professional is if the class numbers more than fifteen students. Sub-standard and even standard class areas would not do since the neat arrangement of rows of desks and chairs would have to disappear to permit cluster arrangements, study carrels, and a semi-private conferencing and testing center. Also, more area than what a standard classroom offers is necessary simply because of equipment deployment and software storage and retrieval.

The main short-range objective then in setting a new direction is the philosophical acceptance by administrators and teachers of an individualized approach to foreign language learning. Individualization would become the learning style to acquire basic language skills particularly in the earlier part of the sequence and it would be complemented later by special interests and specific skills courses.

For some students who have demonstrated their language ability and potential by the end of the second or third "level", and who are thought to be able to profit from the experience, the schools should provide an "on site", truly acculturating stay of four to six weeks abroad during the school year.

Continued: page eight

Implementing such a program would be impossible for many school systems particularly if they act independently of one another. It need not be so for many others that have now the financial, personnel, and organizational resources to make it happen.

If conditions conducive to the successful introduction and implementation of new learning styles are present, I feel that foreign language teachers, who are accustomed to hard work, would channel their energies in this new direction, a direction that meets the student where he's at and takes him where he can and should go at a pace that he can maintain and on a road that is fulfilling as well as challenging.